

NEWS

Lance corporal conquers swim instructor course

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STAFF WRITER

The splashing sounds of bodies contorting in watery desperation engulf the sounds of your cries for help as you cling onto the last limb of hope that you will not drown. You search for that person whose voice you can hear, but not see. You are issued a warning, “Relax sir, don’t do that again!” The voice has reassured you that you will be helped – forcefully if needed.

The rescuer is a graduate from the Marine Combat Instructor of Water Survival Course held at the Depot’s Combat Pool.

Lance Cpl. Jerome Atger, administrative clerk with the Command Inspector’s Office, along with eight other students graduated June 4. That would not be an unusual achievement, except for the fact that he is a lance corporal, who was participating in a NCO level course.

According to Marine Corps Order 1500.52B, the minimum grade for this course is corporal, although that is waiverable with the endorsement of the commanding officer. Graduates of this course will receive an additional Military Occupational Specialty of 8563 with their initial MCIWS certification.

Since March 2000, there has not been a lance corporal in the class let alone one who sought out the course with such vigor.

“Swimming is kind of my niche,” said Atger. “I’m pretty good at it, so I might as well take advantage of it. I had heard that the course is pretty challenging and that is what being in the Marine Corps is all about - doing things that can create a challenge and trying to overcome that.”

The MCIWS Course is based off of the Red Cross’ Lifeguard Training Course, but is set to be more applicable in war-fighting, combat type scenarios, said Staff Sgt. Christopher Carlisle, Marine combat instructor trainer of water survival.

“I did all of my swim qualifications up to the last level, which is [Water Survival Qualified],” said Atger. “The instructors thought I did a pretty

good job with that and I should try to become an instructor.”

Not only did he want to challenge himself, but also to extend that challenge as a training tool at any future assignment in the Corps.

“I figure, if I were to PCS somewhere, they might be able to use me to conduct swim qualifications or something like that,” he said. “It is always a good thing to have something additional, and it looks pretty good in your Service Record Book.”

Atger has made several lasting impressions in his two years, six months in the Marine Corps. One person who he has re-established contact with is one of his former drill instructors. That drill instructor has been there to encourage Atger to accomplish the goals he has set for himself. Encouraging him to find ways to make them happen and then see them through until the end.

“He always asked, ‘How can I go to swim school,’” said Staff Sgt. Richard Vaneycke, drill instructor with Platoon 3048 Kilo Company, 3rd RTBn. “I kept telling him, you have to be a corporal or you will have to go through your chain of command and get a waiver.”

That is exactly what Atger did, he went through the proper channels and got the OK to enroll in the course.

“I wanted to have the opportunity to go to a formal school,” said Atger. “This was something that a lot of people told me was a tough school, and I wanted to find out for myself. Anybody has the ability to go through that course, it’s just about pushing yourself physically and mentally.”

Shortly after the class began, one of the instructors at the Combat Pool called Vaneycke and let him know that Atger was enrolled in the course. That made an indelible impression on Vaneycke who already had high expectations for his former recruit, whom he described as a stand out who volunteered for everything.

“I think that him being a lance corporal and doing this among sergeants and staff NCOs who have been in the Marine Corps for 10 to 15 years is a great accom-



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Lance Cpl. Jerome Atger, administrative clerk with the Command Inspector’s Office, participates in a simulated rescue during the Marine Combat Instructor of Water Survival Course at the Outdoor Pool May 26. Atger was the first non-NCO to complete the course since 2000. (Below) Atger emerges after a 20-meter underwater swim.

plishment,” said Vaneycke. “There is a lot involved in swim school, and it is one of the hardest courses that I have been to in the Marine Corps, both mentally and physically.”

That fact could not be truer when one considers the amount and the quality of the students that were dropped as the course progressed. All except three of the initial 17 students had just graduated from Drill Instructor’s School.

“He had a good attitude and he was strong in the water,” said Carlisle. “We started with 17 and finished with nine, so that means a lot of sergeants and staff NCOs didn’t make it that far, and that is an accomplishment on it’s own.”

Vaneycke remembers the course as very challenging with its constant physical demands and verbatim testing.

“The way I look at it is if there is a lance corporal outdoing me, then there is something wrong,” said Vaneycke, a graduate of the MCIWS course. “In comparison to the my years of experience, for him to make it as far as he has is pretty impressive.”

Making comparisons to recruit training, Atger found a familiar ditty, “Every stroke is a struggle,” that helped him through the course. Often recruits will live chow to chow in order to get through each day, and that is the same principle that Atger fell back on.

“There where days where I asked myself how can I continue,” he said.

He managed to continue. Each day finding something new deep down inside among the small goals he set for himself.

“You live day by day,” said Atger. “Sometimes I would get discouraged and think that this stroke is going to [kill me]. Then to think that I have to do 350 more strokes just like that. If you have that mindset that you want to accomplish something, despite the fact that it might be difficult, you can accomplish it.



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atmosphere of fun and friendliness during the event.

“I had a great time out there,” said Lance Cpl. Chris Seward, military justice clerk, Depot Law Center. “It’s just really motivating to see everybody out there together.”

While the distance of the run made it difficult, it was the challenge and the satisfaction of completing the journey that drove the participants all the way to the end, said Capt. Bradley W. Anderson, commanding officer, Headquarters Co., who boasted that there were no drops from Headquarters Co.

Marines participating in this event had to prepare both physically and mentally. Over the course of the winter and spring, three-, four-, and five-mile battalion runs had been held in order to physically prepare the Marines for this event.

To prevent dehydration, the runners slowed down several times for water. Also, the runners ran through an outdoor shower approximately half way through the course to alleviate some of the discomfort from the long run.

Water allowed the Marines’ bodies to handle the long distance, but positive energy made the difference in performance.

To make sure motivation remained high during the run, the Parris Island Marine Band

played music throughout the course including “Eye of the Tiger,” “Chariots of Fire,” and “Ants Marching.” As the runners ran down the final stretch, it was the Marines’ Hymn that brought them home.

“It was great to see the runners getting into the music,” said Sgt. Justin W. Schmidt, trumpet player in the Parris Island Marine Band. “They were doing the whole ‘Rocky run-and-punch’ thing. It’s awesome to see that sort of reaction.”

After the sweat-and-water-soaked runners arrived at the H&SBn. physical training field, Amland gave a short speech congratulating the Marines of H&SBn. for their accomplishment.

“It was my privilege to share this trying experience with all of you,” said Amland. “You all proved your determination and strength this morning.”

The Marines who participated in the run met together in the H&SBn. Mess Hall to enjoy a special Warriors’ Breakfast of steak, eggs, muffins, cereal and other breakfast items. The Marines who were exhausted only a few minutes before, were laughing and talking together.

“It’s simply a fun time,” said Michael J. Molinsky, Combat Visual Information Center photographer. “It might hurt while you’re doing it, but once you’re all done, it’s a great feeling.”

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Woodward placed these pads, which only soak up oil, into the water and the team’s mission was to control and contain the simulated spill.

Using hand signals and radio communication, the crews positioned themselves behind the simulated spill with a 600-foot containment boom in tow.

That boom, equipped with an underwater skirt, will float on the waters surface and act as a barrier to the oil.

Using the boom, the boats attach a line at each end and pull, forming a “U,” to catch the oil slick as it sits atop the water’s surface.

Taking into consideration the speed of the water’s movement and the speed of the boats, the team will then pull

the spill to shore where a skimmer, acting like a vacuum, will remove the contaminant from the water.

“We are out there trying to protect the environment,” said Woodward. “This is the only environment we have. The water that is out there now is the only water that has ever been.”

No one has ever created one single drop of new water, it just gets recycled over and over by the environment, he added.

Personnel who participated in the training harbor that feeling of respect for the environment.

“If somebody sees a spill, it is their job to report it to the environmental office or the fire department, and not say, ‘that’s not my problem, I didn’t

do it,’” said Cynthia Zapotoczny, environmental protection specialist with Natural Resources. “We can’t be everywhere on the base all of the time, so we need people to call us.”

That sentiment is mutually applicable to anyone who fishes or even likes to eat seafood.

“I like to get out there and fish, shrimp and everything else, but if there is nothing but oil out in the water, everything would be ruined,” said Staff Sgt. Scott Hassellback, WFTBn. staff NCO in charge of the Small Craft Section.

For more information on environmental awareness, visit the Environmental Protection Agency on-line at www.epa.gov/oilspill; to report a spill call 911.